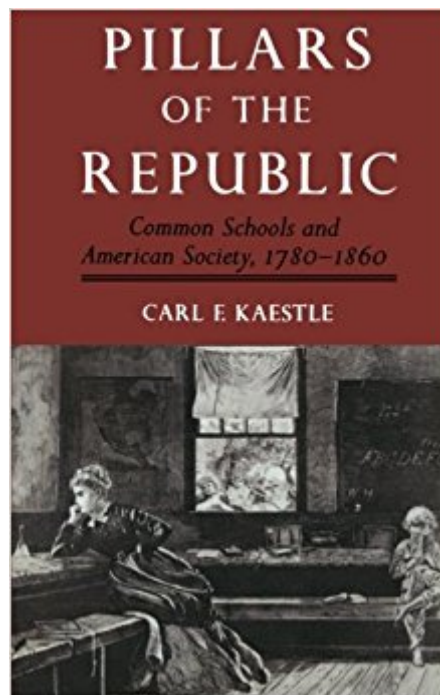




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Pillars Of The Republic: Common Schools And American Society, 1780-1860 (American Century)



Synopsis

Pillars of the Republic is a pioneering study of common-school development in the years before the Civil War. Public acceptance of state school systems, Kaestle argues, was encouraged by the people's commitment to republican government, by their trust in Protestant values, and by the development of capitalism. The author also examines the opposition to the Founding Fathers' educational ideas and shows what effects these had on our school system.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

“An eloquent and thoughtful essay, one of those glances back in time which shows us where we are. Kaestle leads us to understand why uniform, centralized public-school systems evolved out of haphazard educational alternatives, yet he also reflects on what has been lost, in variety, responsiveness, individual choice, and local control, as this nation has pressed on with an educational 'modernity' ever more centralized and vapid. A very wise and compassionate book.”
—Kenneth A. Lockridge, University of Michigan
“Extremely valuable and insightful.”
—Joseph F. Kett, University of Virginia
“A splendid achievement. In assessing traditional and new interpretations of pre-Civil War common schools Kaestle has given us a fresh understanding of troublesome controversies. Especially notable is the precision he brings to our awareness of the interrelationships between ideology, social and cultural change, and leadership. This exposition, often enlivened by vivid illustrations, is always readable.”
—Merle Curti, University of Wisconsin

Carl F. Kaestle is University Professor of Education, History, and Public Policy at Brown University. He is the author of numerous books on the history of education, including, *Literacy in the United States: Readers and Reading Since 1880*.

As a graduate student in Education, I must say that *Pillars of the Republic* is an essential read. While there have been a few different histories of American public education, Kaestle's is the first I know of to focus exclusively on the early period of American history (starting in 1780). The first several chapters focus on the educational outlets in the early founding-and-shortly-thereafter period, when children of the rich and middling classes were generally educated in small and roughshod schools that were often supported both by local taxes and parent tuition. These schools generally had short terms, were not divided by grade level, and had curricula consisting of the teacher instructing students with books brought from students' homes. The middle chapters cover the period (early 1800's) where the states and localities argued with the question of how to educate more students (particularly of the working class and immigrants). More schools were set up (supported by local property taxes) in a quest to educate a larger segment of students. The book's last chapters focus on the middle 1800's - where there was an increasing zeal for standardization of quality in schools and more state control. "Normal schools" were established to teach instructional methods to teachers, the office of State Superintendent was invented, and localities lost more and more control of schooling in favor of state control, which was not without serious dissent from democrats of the Jeffersonian tradition. Through it all, Kaestle writes in a very readable style while never glossing over any detail. Nothing that he says goes without being backed up by evidence, be it quotes from a source or statistics from the time. As another reviewer notes, the book is certainly academic and probably not for the casual reader but, at the same time, it can easily be read by the interested and motivated layreader. What was of most interest to me was the story of a nation founded on the idea of skepticism toward centralized government slowly evolving a more and more standardized education system. Kaestle lets us see both sides of this historic debate: those who were for centralization as a means of guaranteeing consistency in education, and those against centralization as a violation of the localism America was (in part) founded on. A very interesting book that no one interested in educational history should miss. For a good read that, in some way, picks up where *Pillars of the Republic* leaves off is *An Elusive Science: The Troubling History of Education Research*, which starts in the early 20th century and deals with the "professionalization" of schooling and the "scientizing" of pedagogy.

Good comprehensive overview of the history of American schools. It is not the most engaging writing style, but the amount of time and energy put into researching it is amazing. This will give anybody an idea of how public schools got started.

This book provides a solid overview of the foundations of education in the United States. It is a must need for any education course to set down the roots of education.

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This is the best book available on the Nineteenth Century common school and the social and educational ideals that placed the common school at the forefront of public education in the U.S. The common school was an organizationally simple institution that plausibly promised a great deal: children studied the same things in the same place in the same way, with the expectation that outcomes would be the same. Since the common school was rooted in an organizationally uncomplicated, socially rural, and economically small-scale agricultural society, common schools focused on basic skills: reading, writing, and computing. Beyond that, their objectives were cultural and largely implicit: to imbue students with a common world view premised on the notion that, whatever the differences among them, they were all in the same boat. As a result, later educational practices, such as ability grouping and curriculum tracking, would have been anathema to common school reformers, who sought to emphasize likeness rather than foster differences. Unlike early-Twentieth Century education policy makers, common school reformers were not afflicted with the notion that we lived in a rapidly changing, science-based, technology-intensive world in which real or imagined differences in intellectual potential had to be systematically cultivated. The common school was not designed to select, sort, and allocate to changing positions in an evermore complex labor market, but to culturally homogenize students. This was expected to assure social cohesion and stability by instilling students with a common set of values and behavioral repertoires,

an ethos and a complement of skills that put them in a good position to be self-sufficient and self-determining in the comparatively static and simple society of the northern and eastern United States before the Civil War. Common school reformers were keenly aware that immigration from southern and eastern Europe threatened the religious, linguistic, and political sameness that still characterized most of the country. They were also aware that the emergence of classes marked by substantial economic differences posed a real threat to the idea that we were all in the same boat. The essential skills and common world view instilled by the ideal-typical common school were intended to counter these alien and insidiously divisive influences. The common school was intended to mitigate the development of an antagonistic relationship between capital and a small but emerging class of urban wage laborers. Once again, the idea that we were all in the same boat was of paramount importance. In some instances, common schools, no doubt, were designed to foster social harmony that masked real differences among American citizens, maintaining the wealth and power of the privileged at the expense of the rest. Nevertheless, when common school reformers such as Thomas Mann argued that in the U.S. the only possible monopoly was a monopoly on cultivated talent, he believed what he said. His claim seemed to make abundant sense in a society characterized by the absence of royalty, without a class of nobles, devoid of hereditary aristocracy, and with no legally sanctioned special privileges for selected groups. The fact that blacks and native Americans did not share in this nascent meritocracy was conveniently overlooked, as if these differences were natural and inevitable. Whatever its limitations and failures, the Nineteenth Century common school was an institution that was built on and fostered further development of American's traditional, even if wildly unrealistic, faith in public education. Among political radicals active in the 1830's, the promise of the common school gave rise to the slogan "anarchy with a school master." In other words, education was the only governmental institution that was needed. Once people were schooled, everything else would take care of itself. Kaestle explains all this and much more with the ease, sure-handedness, and lucid prose of an accomplished historian writing for a broad-based audience of intelligent non-specialists. I learned more about American public education, both past and present, from *Pillars of the Republic* than from any other book I've read, with the possible exception of Rush Welter's *Popular Education and Democratic Thought in America*.

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